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The able Colonel Abel

No American has cause to mourn the death of Col. Rudolf Abel, but — on the principle of not speaking ill of the dead — admiration persists for his proficiency on the job.

Col. Abel was a Soviet citizen who did what he could do best — spy. As such he was a spies' spy, the best known spy of his generation.

There have been other spies, but true to their calling, they have left only shadow impressions behind them. There are volumes on the life of Richard Sorge who worked as a spy for the Germans in Japan when all the time, so the books say, he was a Soviet spy.

More is known about Kim Philby than Col. Abel. One of the sources is Philby's autobiography. But he differs from the colonel, who was carrying out an assignment for his country. Philby was the most detestable kind of man, a traitor.

Col. Abel's death is also a reminder of a depressing era in U.S. history. When he was tried in 1957 the United States was still suffering a hangover from the period dominated by the late Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, the man who would put a Communist label on anyone who disagreed with him.

Col. Abel's stay in New York was filled with many of the gadgets favored by spies of fiction. The microfilm slipped in a pencil shell, the shortwave radio, the secret hiding places to pass messages. But in an interview in a Moscow paper after the United States traded him for Francis Gary Powers he made a spy's existence sound grubby. There was so much tedium, he said, in decoding messages from Moscow.

He's gone now, no longer a reminder of a time when this country found itself with egg on its face. The Soviets paid him their highest tributes, but none higher than that of his chief antagonist, Allen W. Dulles, the then chief of the Central Intelligence Agency, who said of him, "I wish we had three or four like him in Moscow right now."